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ABSTRACT

An effective way to expand students' knowledge and enjoyment of noncanonical, or at least unfamiliar, works is by using more familiar works as benchmarks. For example, in a sophomore-level world literature survey course, students have already read a large part of the "Iliad" and all of the "Odyssey" when they are asked to study R. K. Narayan's shortened prose version of an Indian epic, the "Ramayana." Students have no trouble identifying a surprising number of parallels between the epics, inspite of the different religious, cultural, and geographic origins that underlie them. For example, both the "Iliad" and the Indian epic tell of a great war caused by the abduction of a princess, a siege of the abductor's city, the confrontation of the abductor and the aggrieved husband, and the return of the princess to her home city. However, within this framework of similarities, it is the differences that students find so uniquely interesting in Valmiki's epic. For instance, there is the emphasis on asceticism, contemplation, and restraint that the Homeric personage would probably consider odd, impractical, even weak. Furthermore, Homer's warriors have no time for speculation; Rama has 14 years for it. For the Greek warrior, human suffering can be explained simply and easily: the gods are responsible. But to the Indian, such issues are the subject of debate and introspection. (TB)

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Using Homer to Teach the Ramayana

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I have found that I can most effectively expand students' knowledge and enjoyment of noncanonical, or at least unfamiliar, works by using more familiar works as benchmarks. For example, by the time I get to Valmiki's Indian epic the Ramayana in my sophomore-level world literature survey, my class has already read, among other things, a large part of the Iliad and all of the Odyssey. This in turn means that at appropriate times I can use comparisons and contrasts between the Homeric and Indian epics to highlight for students the delights of a work that is sometimes strikingly similar to, yet often exotically different from, the more familiar western ethos and manner of Homer.

In my class I use R. K. Narayan's shortened prose version of the Ramayana, which reads much like a modern novel; and I ask class members to use their journals to list and comment on parallels and differences between the epics as they read.

Students have no trouble identifying a surprising number of parallels between the epics, in spite of the different religious, cultural, and geographic origins that underlie them. For example, like the Iliad the Ramayana tells of a great war

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caused by the abduction of a princess, a siege of the abductor's city, the confrontation of the abductor and the aggrieved husband, and the return of the princess to her home city. Vali's wife Tara warns him not to go out to accept Sugreeva's challenge in a passage similar to Andromache's fearful urging that Hector not return to the field but rebuff the rampaging Achaians from defensive positions atop the battlements of Troy. In a passage that, except for the character's name, could almost have come from the Iliad, Ravana's gigantic lieutenant Mahodara, "intoxicated with war fever" (like an Achaian warrior in a frenzied aristeia), and eager for the glory that comes with victory over a famous opponent, resolutely attacks Rama (153). Like Achilles, Ravana pridefully stays out of the fight with Rama's forces until, infuriated by Rama's destruction of Ravana's brother and son (parallel to Hector's slaying of Patroclus), Ravana feels "a terrific rage rising within him" (151), dons his "blessed armor" (149) and rushes forth to challenge Rama, telling himself, "The time has come for me to act by myself again" (152).

The Ramayana contains frequent parallels to the events of the Odyssey as well. Though the circumstances vary, both Rama and Odysseus endure long exiles--Rama for fourteen years, Odysseus the ten years of his return to Ithaka on top of the ten he spent at Troy. Rama's wife Sita staunchly resists Ravana's

threats and blandishments while she is in captivity, just as Penelope puts off the suitors, who have made her a virtual prisoner in her own house. The similarities of the bow-stringing episodes in each story are obvious to even the slowest students. Their more perceptive colleagues also point out that Hanuman and Lakshmana, who endure exile with Rama and act as important lieutenants in the battle with Ravana, correspond to the loyal Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius, who all stand with Odysseus in the showdown with the usurping suitors. Soorpanaka's attempted seduction of Rama parallels Circe's and Calypso's more successful attempts to divert Odysseus from returning home. The final battle concluded, civic order is restored in both epics as Rama returns to Ayodhya in triumph to resume the coronation interrupted fourteen years before; and, in the Odyssey, Odysseus having finally been reunited with Penelope and his father Laertes, Athene steps in to disperse the vengeance-bent relatives of the slain suitors.

There are more general similarities between Homer and the Ramayana as well. For example, both Homer and Valmiki frequently interrupt their narrative line with digressions. Both set their stories in a heroic age peopled by legendary figures, and there are important religious and ethical overtones along with the action. Gods take an active role in both. Thus Indra's sending of his own chariot and charioteer for Rama's use

in battling Ravana reminds some students of Athene's active intervention at crucial times in the Odyssey, the shield made specially for Achilles by Hephaestus, and various gods' participation on both sides on the battlefield before Troy.

But within this framework of similarity, the differences between the Ramayana and the Homeric poems are what my students find so uniquely interesting in Valmiki's epic. There is, for example, an emphasis on asceticism, contemplation, and restraint that a Homeric personage would probably consider odd, impractical, even weak. Thus Rama's training and rites of passage involve not only tests of courage and physical strength, but instruction in yoga, philosophy, and ethics. The question of whether he can destroy Thataka with propriety, because she is a woman, would probably not occur to Achilles--or to Odysseus, who orders the execution of the faithless maids without hesitation. Nor would Homer's characters pause to debate the propriety of Rama's becoming involved in the dispute between Vali and Sugreeva, and particularly the lengthy discussion of the ethical questions raised by Rama's shooting Vali from ambush. One of Rama's most admirable traits is his self-denial, as he accepts an unjust exile without rancor and humbly dons clothing made from tree bark. And the warrior-chieftans of the Iliad would probably find strange indeed the words of King Dasaratha to his favorite son:

"Humility and soft speech--there could be really no limit to these virtues. There can be no place in a king's heart for lust, anger, or meanness" (38).

Homer's warriors have no time for speculation; Rama has 14 years for it. For the Greek warrior, human suffering can be explained simply and easily: the gods are responsible. But to the Indian, such issues are the subject of debate and introspection. The transitoriness of human existence means only to the Greek warrior-hero that he does not have much time to make his mark; for him, death is always only one fateful spear-thrust away, and life is all that matters--consider Achilles' bitter comment to Odysseus in the underworld episode of the Odyssey: "Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand / for some poor country man, on iron rations, / than lord it over all the exhausted dead" (Bk. 11). As Robert Antoine has said, "While the Greek hero feels that human existence is a gift which must be enjoyed, the Indian hero tends to see in it a bondage from which one should escape" (112).

My students are quick to notice not only the sheer number and variety of divine and demonic beings in the Ramayana but the ambivalent powers of the gods as well. For example, the gods often lack precognition of the outcome of major events, such as the climactic battle with Ravana, whereas Homer provides us with the wonderful image of Zeus weighing the fates of Achilles and

Hector in his golden scales (Bk. 22). As in Homer, gods take human form and go among humans, but would Zeus go to a human for help as did Indra, "the chief of all the gods" (103), who sought aid at various times from Rama's father Dasaratha and from the sage Agasthya (9, 12)? Valmiki's gods can even be defeated by a mortal--as we learn in one of the digressive tales, when King Mahabali conquers the whole of earth and heaven (14). The laws of nature are seldom violated in the Homeric epics. Exceptions in the Odyssey are Scylla and, probably, the floating rocks, and the latter may well be a metaphor for an essentially natural phenomenon, as is Charybdis, the whirlpool. The warriors of the Iliad fight only other warriors (plus the occasional god or goddess), and Polyphemus is essentially human--monstrous in behavior, but not a monster. But in the Ramayana the laws of nature are altered or even dispensed with as the storyteller pleases: Thataka is alternately woman, desert, and dragon (12-13); Shiva's bow, which Rama wields with ease, is "so huge that no one could comprehend it at one glance" (28); Ravana and Soorpanaka, Rama's and Sita's chief opponents, are themselves demons with magical powers (and Ravana has 10 heads and 20 arms); Ravana, lovesick at the mere thought of Sita--he hasn't even seen her yet--changes the weather, banishes the seasons, and disrupts the very passage of time itself; even the sun and moon shine or not, as he commands (82-3); Hanuman can assume

gigantic size at will; and in the closing battle, Rama's and Ravana's chariots not only fly but circle the globe (155).

In fact, the western tendency to exaggerate the virtues and prowess of the heroic figure is mild in comparison to the almost bizarrely superhuman deeds, characters, and events of the Ramayana. Thus Bhagiratha, "responsible for bringing the Ganges down to earth . . . prayed intensely for ten thousand years to Brahma, . . . prayed to Shiva for ten thousand years . . . and prayed to Ganga for five thousand years" before finally prevailing on Ganga to become the Ganges (19). Rama defeats Kara's 14 demon commanders, then Kara himself and his whole army of demons singlehanded (76-77); and he similarly disposes of Ravana's whole army, "which stretched away to the horizon," (154) before taking on Ravana himself in a battle that ranges over the whole earth.

Though both Homer and Valmiki's epics share a digressive narrative mode, the interpolated stories in the Ramayana have an almost fairy-tale quality in contrast to Homer's histories of helmets and family trees. Thataka's story explains how the desert came to be (11-14). In Mahabali's story, Vishnu restores the kingdoms of the gods by tricking Mahabali, first by taking dwarfish form and then by becoming so huge that he encompasses the earth and the heavens in two steps (14-15). Perhaps Ahalya's story is the nearest to Greek myth in spirit, reminding

students of Zeus' habit of becoming infatuated with mortal women. The sage Gautama, having caught Indra ("the highest god among the gods") in the act of lying with Gautama's surpassingly beautiful wife Ahalya, decrees that Indra's body "be covered with a thousand female marks, so that in all the worlds, people may understand what really goes on in your mind all the time"; immediately, "every inch of Indra's body displayed the female organ" (21). Gautama also punishes the blameless Ahalya--Indra had assumed Gautama's own form when he seduced her--by turning her to granite. She can only be freed from the enchantment when "Rama passes this way at some future date" (22), which of course happens when some dust from Rama's feet falls on her as he is walking to Sita's city for his wedding (20).

This fairytale quality pervades much of Narayan's version of the epic, in my view, quite in contrast with the somber and often grimly bloody events of the Homeric poems. As I point out to my class, the Iliad is full of pain and suffering--its battle scenes are exciting and realistic, its killings depicted in graphic and bloody detail. In the Odyssey, the slaughter of the suitors, the hanging of the treacherous maids, and the mutiliation of the disloyal goatherd Melanthius are ghastly and have considerable emotional impact despite Homer's lofty style. But the Ramayana, for all its military action, violent death, and physical punishments, is somehow different. I feel the pain

in Homer's battles, but not in the Ramayana's. And indeed, one wonders if the final conflict between Rama and Ravana takes place in the external world of searing pain and bloody corpses at all, or rahter in Rama's mind. Consider this description of the penultimate attack by Ravana, who is invoking a weapon called "Maya"--designed to create illusions:

> With proper incantations and worship, he sent off the weapon and it created an illusion of reviving all the arm[y] and its leaders . . .and bringing them back to the battlefield. Presently Rama found all those who, he thought, were no more, coming on with battle cries and surrounding him. Every man in the enemy's army was again up in arms. . . .Rama asked, . . . "How are all these coming back? They were dead." Matali explained, "In your original identity you are the creator of illusions in this universe. Please know that Ravana has created phantoms to confuse you. If you make up your mind, you can dispel them immediately." . . . Rama at once invoked a weapon called "Gnana"--which means "wisdom" or "perception." . . . And all the terrifying armies who seemed to have come on in such a great mass suddenly evaporated into thin air. (156)

Shortly after, Rama delivers the lethal blow to Ravana in the form of Brahmasthra, a weapon devised by Brahma himself. Immediately Ravana is transformed, revealing a being "devout and

capable of tremendous attainments," whose "face shone with serenity and peace":

> Rama's arrows had burnt off the layers of dross, the anger, conceit, cruelty, lust, and egotism which had encrusted his [Ravana's] real self, and now his personality came through in its pristine form. (159)

All this suggests that in the world of the Ramayana, evil is only a temporary abberation from good and not a permanent entity. And in fact, we are told on the next page that Ravana's spirit will "go to heaven, where he has his place."

Such is not true, I believe, for Homer, as the Odyssey shows. The shade of Achilles is as sullenly ferocious as ever (Bk. 11, 547-61); the dead suitors are quickly conducted to their permanent dwelling in the underworld. And were it not for the direct intervention of Athene the Odyssey would close on yet another cycle of retributive killing in response to the code of blood vengeance. There are no miraculous transformations of character when a Homeric personage dies.

My students and I find other noteable differences between the Homeric and Indian epics that I could detail if time allowed. For example, there are occasional flashes of humor in the latter and a much more frank treatment of sex than is found in the Iliad and Odyssey. There are no doubt other ways of conveying to American students the delights of the Ramayana and

other unfamiliar works outside the European tradition, but I have found that close observation of both the similarities and differences between Homer and Valmiki succeed admirably with most of my students. In fact, in the informal poll that I often conduct at the end of the course, many of them tell me the Ramayana was the work they enjoyed most.

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